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The Alchemist

GONUL PAKSOY HAS TRANSFORMED PERCEPTIONS OF TURKISH FASHION

Science or art: from the earliest days of our education we are pressed to decide to which faction we belong. To find our place we must discover if we possess the calm rational sense and detached curiosity of the scientist or the unbridled creativity and untamed temperament of the artist. Although we accept the existence of the occasional renaissance man with a foot in each camp, the majority of us show just one face to society and become through practice and intent one type or the other.

In this sense and many others Gonul Paksoy is exceptional. There are not many designers who have published academic papers on 'the separation of Tar into its components and its definition': still fewer hold a PhD with a doctoral thesis on root dye chemistry. Designer, collector and renowned chef, Gonul absorbs elements of old and new, east and west in an astonishingly creative compound. Transformation and the desire to create perfection from materials both base and beautiful is at the root of her work.

How a chemist came to create some of Turkey's finest clothes and jewelery, publish books on her cooking methods, and stage exhibitions of dolls is perhaps more logical than it appears. Gonul Paksoy was born into a family with distinguished history. Her great-grandfather was Governor of the then Ottoman province of Mossul and one of the most prominent mathematicians and astronomers of his time. Her parents cultivated her appreciation of food, dress, architecture and history. They were a family with a "refined taste, who valued and enjoyed life" but the death of her father when Gonul was just 11 dramatically altered her situation. In her own words, 'confusion reigned' and she was entered into a boarding school soon after. Here they no longer saw her as a child and Gonul grew up quickly: "Your toys have been taken away from you. You can't make ragdolls anymore. You can't produce anything." The re-emergence of a range of intriguing ragdolls as part of the Gonul Paksoy current collections is a reaction to her experiences at school, "One of the things I wanted to convey was the need to reflect upon the education system," she explained. ▶

Sari factory in Palli, Rajasthan, India, photographed by Jeremy Horne/Corbis

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At school Gonul consoled herself with painting. She was a gifted artist and further education at the academy of arts was predicted by her teachers. "People always try to guess which child is going to do what in life" says Gonul, but she thwarted expectations and chose chemistry and – to begin with – an academic career. Perhaps she was looking for certainty? One thing often claimed for science is the ability to provide answers and the promise of proof. Beauty on the other hand cannot be added with a pipette or broken down into individual molecules. Yet the two have in common the process of being inspired by an idea and setting out to realise it, through trial, error and constant effort.

Taking her culture and heritage as a starting point she has developed a restrained and elegant style. Yet she has not simply 'toned down' the exuberance and luxury of traditional Turkish dress in order to appeal to the tastes of the aesthetically repressed Northern European or the conservative American. Described in the past as 'mystical' her clothes and jewellery reveal a multitude of influences and a synthesis of her past experiences. Gonul herself considers them works of art: "I do not make garments with the sole intention of having them worn."

Her success surpasses many who attempt to create 'wearable art' and lies in the simplicity of structure and beauty of the materials. Her respect for her materials is exemplified by her attitude to the antique Ottoman textiles she incorporates into her designs. She alters without diminishing these rare pieces of cloth, and her confidence in the process – which often involves deconstructing and re-dyeing – is remarkable. She strikes an importance balance, recreating from some fabrics and preserving others: "I protect everything that needs protection...I re-infuse life into those things that have been abandoned and are about to disappear." Gonul is anchored by an understanding that her work – and fabric itself – must remain connected to life and her fearlessness is contagious, rubbing off on those who buy and wear her ▶



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clothes. Coleridge once said 'a palace is more than a house but it must be house, at least': in their functional but undeniable beauty, her jackets and dresses that combine knitted raw silk, wool, velvets, embroidered silks, felt and ikat dyed fabrics more than fulfil this mandate.

You may think someone as busy as Gonul would eat on the run but you'd be mistaken. Like many individuals who are truly absorbed by ideas her work does not exist as a separate, isolated part of her daily routine but spreads across every aspect of her life including what she eats. To Gonul cuisine is "design that leaves a taste on your palate...an encounter of all things beautiful presented on a table." Like the Turkish equivalent of Hester Blumenthal she approaches food armed with her knowledge of science: "A meal is not a concoction. Meals do have biochemical balances though", and she speaks of spices as the "aromatic molecules" that penetrate the food. Her dishes – including grilled strawberries with fennel and stuffed spring onions with rose petals – are a fusion of different tastes, cultures and her own vision. Like everything she creates they are mouthwateringly desirable. ●●● **Beth Smith**

- 01 jacket: raw silk, detail.
- 02 reversible shawl: silk and silver thread, various weaves .
- 03 jacket: linen/ silk/ silver thread embroidery.
- 04 jacket: raw silk, sezgin sander collection.
- 05 bird man: rag dolls.
- 06 reversible jacket: raw wool, raw silk.
- 07 silk skirt: detail.
- 08 necklace: old silver thread, silk and wool beads.
- 09 dress: silk.

